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AND
EASTERN VIRGINIA LEGAL AID SOCIETY
ANNUAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING
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Thank you for inviting me to be here this evening on such a happy occasion. I am very pleased to join you to celebrate your success and to recognize with you the collaborations on which these milestones rest.

I would like to begin by congratulating Chuck Wynder and Carl Stevens on the cooperative relationship that this joint dinner represents. Their work together to meet a wide spectrum of legal needs in this service area is a good example of how creative efforts can resolve complex problems. Each of us is fully aware that legal services programs individually do not have nearly enough resources to meet the demand from low income people in their states for access to justice and resolution of legal emergencies. We all know that two minds are better than one—but we don't always recognize that combining one hard-working, dedicated staff with another one yields more than two groups of effective advocates.

It is, I believe, an indication of the commitment of these two programs to legal services, that we have among us a number of distinguished guests. I would like to recognize Celestine Carter, former head of the Hampton Branch of the NAACP, Dr. Mary Christine and Kenneth Alexander, both of the Virginia House of Delegates, and General District Court Judge Bonnie Jones. The partnerships and support that your presence illustrates is critical to a vital and vibrant state justice community. Thank you for participating this evening and for your on-going support. Mark Braley is also with us, and I want to recognize his work in emphasizing the central role of diversity in any effort to provide high quality legal services. And, of course, I salute Tonya Henderson-Stith,

honored tonight with your coveted Pro Bono Award for her commitment to clients and to justice.

I also want to speak for a moment about another individual who exemplifies for me what is so wonderful about the legal service community throughout this great county. Althea Hayward, who is here with me this evening, worked for Peninsula Legal Services in Norfolk for many years. Indeed, during her work as the Acting Executive Director of one of your predecessor programs, she began the journey of merger that led us to this dinner. Althea came to work at LSC about two years ago, and we are so happy that she did. Althea's desire to bring everyone to the table to find "common ground" and her knack for identifying and highlighting the gifts and talents of others has brought new energy to our state planning work. Many of you know that Althea plays many roles in her life—she is the wife of an AME Pastor and, as such, helps Sam in co-pastoring a large church in Baltimore. She herself is an ordained minister. She is the mother of two beautiful and successful daughters. She is a working woman, a daughter, an aunt, a niece and a cousin. She is a trusted friend who strives to be available when friends need her. Althea's various interests, her life experiences, and her multiple roles have contributed to her personal and professional interests in issues related to diversity, inclusion, and multicultural competency. And, because of those interests and experiences, she has played a significant role at LSC in helping us to become more tolerant, sensitive and inclusive and in making us more aware of the problems facing our most disenfranchised clients and their communities. Her ability to find the most positive aspects of any situation does much to ensure that every situation will yield positive outcomes. Althea also has the courage of her beliefs. Her wisdom and foresight are really at the heart of the partnerships we honor tonight. She knew before many others that a new approach was necessary to serve clients well, and she was bold enough to take the first steps that set today's delivery system in motion. I am so pleased that you are honoring her tonight and I am especially proud to be here with you for that reason.

During this last year, I have had the opportunity to speak at many events such as this one. In my speeches, I often focus on the importance of forming partnerships and

collaborations with other individuals and groups when implementing an effective legal services delivery system—because it is a notion that needs to be recognized and reinforced. One of my favorite African proverbs reminds us that when spider webs unite they can tie up a lion. As with so many lessons gleaned from the continent of Africa, this one bears examining.

Many *lions* threaten our clients: hunger, violence, poverty, homelessness, crime, discrimination, bigotry, illness, lack of education and lack of opportunities. Quite often, legal services programs are the only resource available to help these clients with their many problems. Yet legal services resources are often as slender as that spider web referenced in the proverb—and they are stretched as far. When inadequate resources are coupled with restrictions and other requirements imposed by funders, the system of resources that support the legal services community—at times—will resemble a spider's complicated weaving. In those instances, addressing the legal needs of the hundreds of thousands of people who qualify for free legal services becomes possible only when LSC-funded providers join with other organizations and individuals to spin a safety net for clients where each strand supports another such that, *collectively*, the group is able to offer support and assistance to greater numbers of clients.

It was this idea of expanding access to legal services that motivated us to launch the state planning initiative in 1995. Our community was struggling to survive setbacks in funding and political popularity. Clients needed legal services more than ever, yet our stability was tenuous. Only by banding together with others in the state justice community could we even hope to be positioned to provide needed legal assistance to poor people. Several wonderful results occurred from the efforts of legal services programs to reach out to likely and unlikely partners. Predictably, many our programs expanded the kinds of services they offered clients by increasing their access to the talents and expertise of the private bar. Clients benefited from holistic approaches to problems as legal services programs linked with domestic violence shelters, consulted with teachers and social workers, and became aware of the powerful resources lodged in the faith-based community. But, there also was an unanticipated effect. Many people

and organizations expressed delighted amazement at being included in our work, pleased at our recognition that they too sought a better world, and wanted to take on activities that improved the lot of its most overlooked residents. By asking these people and entities to work with us, the legal services community voiced a collective recognition that others also cared about their fellow citizens and contributed significantly to the fight for justice. As a sage once noted, the person who plays alone never loses—but of course, he also never wins. With state planning and the partnerships it spawns, the entire state justice community wins.

This was a lesson I experienced firsthand as an executive director. Guiding two very different programs taught me the need for partnerships in a variety of circumstances, rural and urban. And the variety of circumstances brought home to me how useful it is to have a variety of partnerships. Clients' problems arise out of a nexus of events—legal, political, social and cultural. No one individual or even one entity can be ready at all times to meet and resolve such a complex array of issues. Partnerships are valuable not only for the additional and essential fuel they bring to a program's delivery system, they also are beneficial for the infusion of extra creativity, courage, and freshness into our work. It hardly bears repeating that legal services advocates spend many hours each day trying to resolve urgent legal problems that frequently have their root in the same tragic circumstance—the circumstance of poverty. Additional legal muscle and a fresh look at the issue can lead to innovative approaches and new solutions. In my experience as a litigator, collaborations with private bar practitioners significantly enriched my work product and the representation I provided to clients. The experience was equally useful for the private bar, sharpening volunteer lawyers' insights into the work of legal aid advocates and the pressing problems of poor people. They also relished the deep satisfaction that comes with our work, frequently confiding in me that they wished they too had elected to pursue a legal services career because of the personal satisfaction derived from contributing so enormously to the commonwealth.

Those of us who have been at this work for a long time—and that includes many in this room—understand that the only way we can build sustainable communities of

justice and chip away at the problems facing our clients is by being the catalyst that combines and utilizes the shared knowledge and experience of the hundreds of people in each state who care deeply about the fate of our least powerful residents. We build partnerships because they contribute to the health and longevity of every legal services program. But, we also pursue partnerships because we understand the truth of another African proverb—the broad resources of an entire village are necessary to effectively care for its most fragile inhabitants. Just as children benefit from the combined nurturing skills of all the adults whose lives touch theirs, from political leaders voting on healthcare and education issues to parents who manage their offspring's day to day existence, so too do we need a community of justice to ensure that those who are living in poverty have access to lifeblood of our democracy—a justice system that promises a fair chance to each and every one of us.

For Legal Services of Eastern Virginia and Eastern Virginia Legal Aid Society this evening is a turning point. For what must seem like a very long period time, the Virginia legal services community has turned inward in order to restructure its delivery system, first by examining the status quo to learn where improvements need to be made, then by embarking on the sometimes difficult adventure of retooling the status quo. Such inward focus was appropriate for the intense effort required to redesign and implement your current delivery system. Now, however, it is time for you to begin to focus on and to redirect your energy outward to the greater community—renewing partnerships with old friends while seeking new resources and uncommon alliances.

This is a wonderful time for legal services providers in the state. Along with members of the private bar, the judiciary and other representatives of the state's justice community you have created a vision for the most effective delivery system for Virginia and you have made that vision a reality. At times, I am sure the effort was challenging if not overwhelming, but all of you had the courage of your convictions. And although I know that you will not rest on your laurels, you are poised to enjoy the rewards of a civil justice system that is stronger and more responsive system, one that reaches more clients and provides more effective service than ever before. So for a few minutes tonight I am

giving you permission to rest on your laurels, albeit for just a moment—congratulate yourselves on your wonderful achievements and recognize that what you have done has moved everyone in this room closer to the day when we will achieve justice for all. But also recognize that because of the courage, persistence and strength of purpose that you have demonstrated, we in the national legal services community now expect even greater things from you. You have shown us how to weather difficult and even divisive situations to emerge intact and in good spirits. You have raised the standard for diversity efforts in the statewide arena. Your collaborations represent the best partnerships have to offer. I am delighted to be here tonight and to share in all of this with you. But, I look forward to the next occasion we are together so we can discuss—at that time—all of the great things I expect you to do tomorrow and all of the tomorrows that will follow this dinner.

I would like close tonight by talking about why I have remained in legal services for all of these years and why it has become both my career and my personal passion:

- I believe in legal services because I recognize—as do you—that for many Americans the concept of equal justice is but an elusive dream.
- I believe in legal services because I know that the most vulnerable members of our society—homeless children, nursing home residents, persons with mental illness, low-income residents of public housing—will be *shut out* of the justice system if legal services is not available to help them protect their rights.
- I believe in legal services because for many of our clients economic and social inequality remains the central reality of their lives and because democracy depends on our ability to breathe life into our promise of "justice for all" regardless of color, national origin, gender, or personal beliefs.

- I believe in legal services because when I took the oath to become a lawyer, I acknowledged that the law should be available to everyone and that I, along with every other lawyer in this great county, had the responsibility to "*make it so.*"
- I believe in legal services because I have a stake in ensuring that low-income persons in Norfolk, in Chicago, on the Navajo reservations in Arizona, in the barrios of Los Angeles, on the rural Eastern Shore and in the poorest neighborhoods of D.C. can get timely, high-quality, effective legal assistance when they need it. All our clients deserve my attention, my assistance and my promise to make certain that the halls of justice are not closed to them.
- I believe in legal services because I have seen many legal services programs in action up close and personal, and I know that despite our flaws, imperfections and challenges, and our sometimes knee-jerk reaction to embrace the status quo as if it were the Holy Grail, we have proved ourselves to be essential in the lives of our clients. We play a central role in our justice system and, for the most part, we have played it well, we have played it with passion, and we have played it with commitment.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I believe in the power of legal services because of you. Because of all of you in this room tonight, I know I am not alone in this journey towards justice. All of you are with me, and we are traveling this path together. Your commitment to making the law accessible to everyone motivates me to do the same. Your commitment to your clients impresses me and gives me strength when I am feeling weak. Your courage and persistence and clarity of vision in the face of what must have been very difficult moments, days, months and years inspires me. You make me proud—and very grateful—to be a legal services lawyer